

A Research in the Influences of Vague Language on Second Language Learning

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Abstract: Vague language is widely used in both spoken and written English and it is also a very important language variable. The process of language use is active, during which speakers and hearers constantly have to make choices out of variables. This paper mainly studies the influences of vagueness in language on second language learning and attaches importance to the flexible selections of vague language in the target language.

Key words: vague language; influence; second language learning; selection

1. Introduction

Vague language is a very common phenomenon in language use. The vagueness in language has been studied for many years by many scholars at home and abroad. Nowadays more and more people begin to realize it. The uncertain meaning of vague language is subject to many factors, such as, psychological factors, structural factors, and social-cultural factors, etc. This paper mainly concerns the influences of vague language on second language learning.

2. Accuracy-oriented Learning Style

Psychologically, Chinese students tend to seek clarity or distinctiveness in their learning process. They always try to find equivalents between English and Chinese. In speaking and writing, they try to speak and write as explicitly as possible. In listening and reading, they try to catch and understand each word as accurately as possible. This accuracy-oriented learning process is a serious problem that hinders their understanding of vague language in learning process. This phenomenon mainly stems from the following reasons:

2.1 Intolerance of Ambiguity

Language learning is a highly demanding task. Learners often feel helpless in dealing with new information that must be processed, assimilated and associated with the existing knowledge. The lexical items, the syntactic structures, and the phonological and phonetic elements of any two languages do not match. No matter where language learning occurs, learners have to cope with uncertainties resulting from the lack of total equivalents between any two languages.

The intolerance of ambiguity seriously hinders second language learning. If people show intolerance of ambiguity and think of ambiguous stimuli as possible sources of threat, because these stimuli are new, complex or insoluble, then these people are reluctant to accept new stimuli, analyze intricate data and deal with the cases that contain contradictory elements. On the contrary, ambiguity-tolerant people who are eager to deal with new,

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complex and insoluble situations are more receptive to change, more willing to take risks (McLain 1993). If a person is unwilling to accept that a word in the target language may have more than one denotation or that he does not want to know the meaning of every single word in a text in order to comprehend a passage, then his/her language learning process will be seriously hampered.

Therefore, learners' awareness of the existence of vagueness in language is very important. If they do not tolerate the ambiguities or uncertainties existed in language learning, their language learning will be seriously hindered.

2.2 The Use of Improper Form and Level of Inexplicitness

Vague language occurs in both speech and writing. However, we have seen that many vague expressions occur more frequently in spoken English, and that some are highly disfavored in written English (Channell 2000). An important component in the language competence of a speaker is the ability to utter sentence patterns which are grammatically incomplete, but contextually appropriate and interpretable. It means the ability to use strategies for being vague constitutes is an important aspect of speakers' communicative competence. Warren (1993:37) proposes that being appropriately inexplicit is a sign of a competent conversationalist and a prominent feature of native speakers' conversations.

Inexplicitness is one form of demonstrating vagueness. Ellipsis, substitution, deixis, or reference are the forms of showing inexplicitness. Speakers often use different forms of inexplicitness to show vagueness. All the above-mentioned forms of inexplicitness have a common feature: they are non-specific independent of context, but they become specific in the particular context. They are briefly analyzed as follows.

Ellipsis and substitution are the two forms of inexplicitness requiring the hearer or reader to recover part of the discourse from the context which the speaker or writer has either chosen to omit or to replace by a substituted element. Language users often prefer to use ellipsis to reduce their utterances to avoid possibilities of repetition. Usually there are three main types of ellipsis: textual, situational and structural.

The speakers' use of deictic expressions in conversations is a common characteristic. In English deictics may be grouped into three categories, typical of time (e.g. now, then, tomorrow), place (e.g. here, there) and person (e.g. we, you, they). Much of the meaning of deictic terms depends on the specific context of situation in which they are used. Reference is a form of cohesion in texts and includes pronouns, articles and demonstratives used by writers and speakers to refer to specific referents in the context. It is a relation that holds between speakers and what they are talking about on a particular occasion. The referential range of referring expressions is fixed by their meanings in language. But their actual reference depends upon a variety of contextual factors. Much of reference involves reliance on context, together with some calculation on the part of speaker and hearer. Readers and hearers recover the specific meaning for reference items either textually or based on the situation.

Second language learners usually follow the rules of explicitness and share the idea that in order to be understood by others, inexplicitness should be avoided. It is also noted that for all the forms of inexplicitness, the native speakers make use of inexplicitness more often than non-native speakers, which indicates that non-native speakers show lower level of inexplicitness in their utterances. That is to say, second language learners' sense of vagueness is in a lower level. Since the use of improper form or level of inexplicitness can make language learning process full of unnecessary accuracy and explicitness, it is apparently impossible for them to describe their meanings independently of consideration of context and inference.

3. Lacking Knowledge of Flexible Selection in the Target Language

Language as a means of social communication is never a homogeneous system with a homogeneous group of speakers. Language use varies from one speech community to another, from one regional group to another, from one social group to another, and even from one individual to another. Any speaker has a variety of codes, styles, and registers from which to choose. In fact, choice-making occurs at every possible level of structure: words, sentences, text and language, code, style and register. The appropriate choice from among the alternatives is also involved in speakers' communicative competence.

3.1 Flexible Selection of Vague Language

Vagueness is a very common phenomenon in the use of language. It is widely used in both speech and writing. Appropriate selection of vague language can greatly improve learner's communicative competence. Vague expressions are not empty fillers inserted by speakers. They are deliberately chosen for their contribution to the communication of message. Vague language is neither "bad" nor "good", independent of context. Its use should be considered with reference to contexts and situations, where it will be judged as appropriate, or inappropriate. The appropriate selection of vague language is what really counts and constitutes an important aspect of the communicative competence. The description of their meanings should take context into consideration. For example:

There's no writing on the blackboard today.

In this sentence, "writing" is a vague word, which respectively means "possibility", "action" or "the result of the action", that is to say, "something written". The meaning of the sentence will be clear in fixed context and it can be interpreted as follows:

- 1) a. It is impossible (for a teacher) to write on the blackboard today because there is no chalk.
b. The teacher can't write on the blackboard today because there is no chalk.
- 2) The teacher is not going to write on the blackboard today since there is only oral work to do.
- 3) There is nothing written on the blackboard today because there have been no lectures in the classroom.

Understanding vague language requires learners to have not just knowledge of the lexis and grammar of English, but also pragmatic knowledge about how it is used, and how it relates to its context. If learners lack knowledge in this field, their understanding, especially the understanding of vague language will be seriously hampered.

3.2 Appropriate Selection of Structures

Verschueren (1999) proposes that "using language must consist of the continuous making of linguistic choices, consciously or unconsciously, for language-internal (i.e. structural) or language-external reasons. These choices can be situated at any level of linguistic form: phonetic / phonological, morphological, syntactic, lexical, and semantic." In other words, in using language, selections should be made at every possible level of structures. Second language learners should attach more importance to the selection of structures which can cause ambiguities or vagueness. Successful communication means the use of appropriate structures in appropriate places. Look at the active and passive voices:

A: The fire caused the destruction of the house.

B: The destruction of the house was caused by the fire.

Chomsky believes that the above two sentences have the same meaning, but when we observe the two sentences a little more carefully, we will find they are not identical even in conceptual meaning, because they do not have the same truth value. This can be verified by negating the above two sentences:

C: The fire didn't cause the destruction of the house.

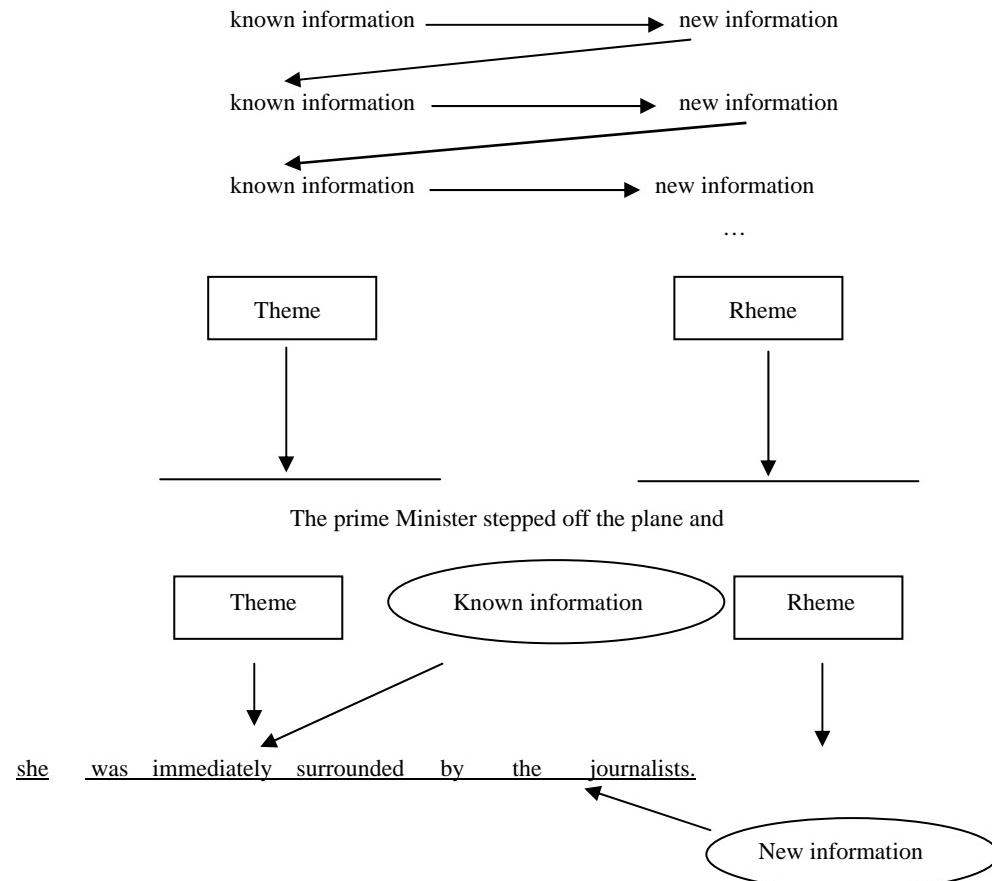
D: The destruction of the house was not caused by the fire.

It can safely be concluded from D that the house has been destroyed, because “the destruction of the house”, which appears as theme, is not generally affected by the negator, but the same conclusion can not be drawn from sentence C. What’s more, their communicative values are also different, as can be seen from the following use of the passive and active structures:

E: The prime Minister stepped off the plane and journalists immediately surrounded her.

F: The prime Minister stepped off the plane and she was immediately surrounded by the journalists.

Native speakers can easily recognize that Sentence F is more natural than Sentence E, because Sentence F conforms to the conventional communication patterns, which can be indicated as follows:



The choices of structures are closely related to the communicative invention of the addresser. If ambiguity reflected in the structure is what the addresser wants to achieve, then it is appropriate, otherwise structural ambiguity should be avoided so as not to cause misunderstanding. For example:

The police were ordered to stop drinking about midnight.

The ambiguous nature of the above structure can be seen from the following two interpretations: one is “The police were ordered to stop people drinking.”; the other is “The police were ordered to stop drinking by themselves.” If these two layers of meaning are what the addresser really wants to achieve, then this structure is appropriate, otherwise misunderstanding arises.

Students should be trained to select appropriate structures which can express the meanings that indicate the real intention of the speaker.

3.3 Active Selection in Certain Context

“Li Ming is drawing a car.” is an ambiguous sentence, because the meaning of the word “draw” is vague. The sentence shares two possible interpretations:

- A. Li Ming is making a picture of a car.
- B. Li Ming is pulling a car.

As for the above example, there is no grammatical rule which can help the hearer to make out the intended meaning of the speaker. If the hearer shares the necessary contextual knowledge, the selection between these two kinds of interpretations can be easily made. Actually, the selection of words is restricted by the context in which the language is used. Therefore, context is the key to understanding.

The selection of one linguistic form over another is determined by the co-text --- such as pronouns, substitutions, and deictics; internal contexts, such as the intentions, assumptions, and presuppositions of speakers and hearers; and external contexts, namely, the situational context of the speech event. It necessarily follows that a successful communication requires not only a sufficient knowledge in linguistics, say, phonetics, lexicology and syntax which makes it possible to recognize ambiguities that may arise at any time in using language, but also that close attention should be paid to the context, which can serve as the only available means to remove the potential ambiguities.

Thus, in isolation, almost all the utterances are highly vague because of the multiplicity of contextual meanings they can fit into. But once in context, words, which are vague, can have appropriate choices. Take “furniture” for example, which has become specific in meaning in the following context, though it is vague independent of context:

There was a fine *rocking-chair* that his father used to sit in, a *desk* where he wrote letters, a nest of small *tables* and a dark, imposing *bookcase*. Now all this *furniture* was to be sold, and with it his own past.

Without context, it is hard to say whether vague words or precise words are preferred. In actual communication, vague words and precise words work mutually to achieve desired effect.

4. Conclusion

The widespread use of vague language for varied purposes and in varied settings shows that vagueness is as important as explicitness in language use. In order to help learners to make full use of vague language, some suggestions are put forward for learners to follow. They are not exhaustive but they are very useful and effective in helping learners in their second language learning.

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